

The uneasy world of novelist David Schmahmann

Raised in South Africa, the Boston lawyer still has the wary eye of an outsider

By Robin Regensburg

Special to the Advocate

Late on the night of May 1, when he saw a cryptic graphic pop up on his computer screen that President Barack Obama was about to make an announcement, novelist David Schmahmann feared for his children.

"I thought, what is this? Has a nuclear bomb gone off? Is there radiation?" Schmahmann said.

It didn't even occur to him that Obama would be revealing the death of Bin Laden.

"I felt nothing but foreboding," he said.

As a native of South Africa and a Jew, Schmahmann said his instinct is to assume something cataclysmic. "I don't think Americans of my generation have internalized that the world really can change overnight," he said. "It has before, did for the Jews in Europe, and it has to some extent for many Jews from South Africa."

Schmahmann, 56, left South Africa nearly 40 years ago, largely because of his discomfort with apartheid. When he returns to his native Durban, he says, he's impressed by the transformation of the once white racist society. Still, he feels uneasy.

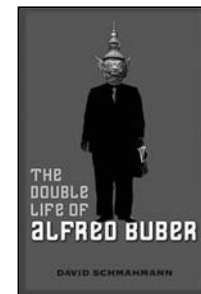
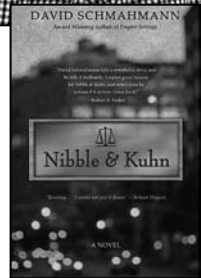
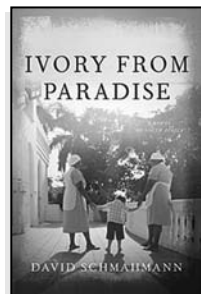
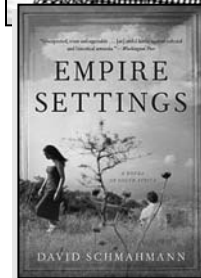
"Jews don't do well in an environment where political discourse is marked by racial distinctions – and today in South Africa skin color is as important as ever, just with a different emphasis – or by fist pumps in the air and angry rhetoric," said Schmahmann. "That's generally not a place where Jews feel they can thrive. There's a lot in the country now that is welcome and wonderful, but a lot that feels ominous, too."

Schmahmann wrote his first novel, "Empire Settings" (2001 and reissued last year), at night when he was a senior partner at a Boston law firm. The apartheid-era story centers on the forbidden love between a 17-year-old Jew and the daughter of a black domestic servant.

"Ivory from Paradise," published earlier this year, is a companion novel, but not a sequel, though it contains many of the same characters. Set after the end of apartheid – when enthusiasm is starting to give way to disillusionment – it depicts a family that is fighting over possessions and ultimately the ownership of memories.

In between those novels, Schmahmann wrote "Nibble & Kuhn" (2009) a parody of a Boston law firm.

And next month, his fourth novel, "The Double Life of Alfred Buber," will be released. Its theme is loneliness, and how some men tend to confuse loneliness with sexual desire. Buber, the narrator and protagonist, is smart, witty, well read and widely admired in his circles. But in matters of the heart, he's lost. Unable to feel at home in his native Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe),



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where his political views put him out of step with others, he immigrates to America. There he finds professional success but not happiness. Uncomfortable in his own skin, Buber searches for female companionship in unusual places, including the underworld of southeast Asia.

Seated in his Weston living room, surrounded by artwork from Israel and antiques from the Far East, Schmahmann discussed his books and his thoughts about being an immigrant, a writer and a father.

Q: Why did you decide to make Buber an immigrant?

A: I strongly identify with the feeling of being an outsider. I'm an immigrant too, and even though I was a partner at a large Boston law firm for over 20 years, and my wife and kids are very American, I still feel as if I'm looking in from the outside at least half the time. I thought my character should be like that too.

Q: Arthur Golden, author of "Memoirs of a Geisha," says your book touches on Vladimir Nabokov. You each left your country of origin as young men – countries that would never be the same. Do you see other similarities?

A: I read "Lolita" in college. When I heard the comparison, I reread it. I do see similarities. Humbert Humbert ["Lolita"] is an immigrant; like Buber, he feels isolated, and they're both victims of their obsessions.

Q: Who are other writers you identify with?

A: I understand in a personal way how Philip Roth writes about Newark in "The Plot Against America," for instance, or in "American Pastoral." He describes a long ago Newark, where everything was intimate and people were connected with each other, and then in other stories how it disappeared – how the place of his origin changed beyond recognition.

I feel a very deep and conflicted sense of loss about South Africa, even as the old system was awful and its end was welcome. The streets and places are mostly the same, but the names are changed; some of the iconic figures have disappeared; and beyond that, it's unclear that people from the past are still welcome. For Buber, it's like that too. There's nothing left of his Rhodesia.

Q: Is that something you view as very much a part of the Jewish experience?

A: Absolutely. The Jewish experience of coming from places bursting with life, the sort written about by Sholem Aleichem that thrive and then disappear, informs our world. There is definitely something Jewish about the way I see the world, the way I write and about Buber.

Q: How do you think being an immigrant has shaped your view of the United States?

A: I love being in America,

and being an American, but I think being an immigrant adds an edge to my appreciation, and it's this: America feels more fragile than I think it may to those who didn't have to work to get here. I don't take for granted that what we cherish in America is immutable.

I'll give you an example. I remember taking my children to school and watching as they recited the Pledge of Allegiance. I got misty eyed because we can all agree on one thing here, which we couldn't where I came from: We pledge allegiance to the central features of this magnificent country, which is exceptional because there is no other country that rests so unambiguously on the principles that America was founded upon – the pursuit of happiness, a uniquely American feature, and life and liberty and due process of law. I was so happy that I was part of it, that my children were part of it, that I stood in a place where I could embrace something so fundamental and without ambivalence.

Q: Do you consider America your home and South Africa your second home?

A: No. America is my home. If I have a second home, it's Israel, not South Africa. I left South Africa for college in the United States in 1972, but my mother had always been very active in Zionist matters and shortly afterward she made Aliyah. My sister was already in Israel, and over the years I've visited dozens of times and spent a lot of time there. My brother and his wife, though, live near me in a suburb of Boston.

Q: None of the main characters in your books live religious lives. Are you observant?

A: I don't live a religious life, but I strongly identify with my community. I'm very committed to Israel and my writing is very informed by my Orthodox Jewish education and my sense of discomfort growing up in South Africa as a Jew.

Q: What inspired you to write this story?

A: I worked as a lawyer in Burma, an extremely quiet place, on and off for a few years.

A particular type I found interesting there was the middle-aged man with the much younger Burmese girl. I used to wonder: What are these men's lives like that they think they can drop in from wherever they live and develop relationships of any substance or maturity with 20-year-old farm girls trying to make a living by selling themselves in bars? What are their lives like that they can be considering taking them home, even, maybe marrying them? I was inspired to write a story about a character like that, without roots, trying to fill a void that he mistakenly thinks can be

filled in this way. What I didn't realize was how much I'd come to like Alfie Buber, and to feel for him, and how much I'd want to find some redemption for him, even as he deluded himself and made strange decisions.

Q: Buber's father is Jewish. The reader doesn't know much about his mother's background, except that she's not Jewish. Why did you choose that kind of ethnicity?

A: I once knew people like that. Most South African Jews [are of Lithuanian descent], and I knew more than a few men of my grandparents' generation who were influenced by events there at the turn of the last century, who were both ardent leftists and fervent atheists.

Buber's father is of this type. He's an aggressive, socialist Jewish man in the middle of colonial Africa, trying to make a living even as he scorns money and the capitalist system, and it's obviously very difficult for him.

He's also married to a non-Jewish woman, and while I don't go into it in any detail, I do suggest that Buber's sense of alienation is in part a product of his mother's distance and his father's inability to adapt. Neither of his parents really fits in, and he doesn't know what to make of himself either as he's growing up.

Q: You've mentioned that you have two young daughters. Has being a parent changed you?

A: I don't think it's changed my internal architecture; I'm the same person I've always been, just very much more rooted. For example, during the Gulf War, when Saddam was firing missiles at Israel, I got on the first airplane and went to Tel Aviv. I wanted to be with my family. I picked up a gas mask at the airport, and I sat with them in the shelters. I couldn't do that now. I have a competing sense of loyalty to my kids to be safe; that's what's changed for me.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I'm working on a novel that I've tentatively called "The Color of Skin."

There was a man called John Dunn who lived in Durban around the turn of the last century. He befriended the Zulu king and had almost 50 Zulu wives and hundreds of mixed-race children. My story is set in the present and told in the first person by one of his descendants. I'm going to recreate the life of John Dunn and his Zulu wives, and how it plays out in my protagonist's internal conflicts 140 years later.

David Schmahmann will discuss "Empire Settings" and "Ivory from Paradise" at Temple Sinai, Worcester, May 16 at 7 p.m. For more on the author, visit www.davidschmahmann.com.